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TWIN CITIES PRESBYTERY

EXTRAVAGANCE

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Scripture
~~Mark March 14:3-9~~
Matthew 26:11-13

January 28, 1986 - 72 seconds into the flight of Challenger - it blew up, and the task for those of us who had to stand up in our pulpits five days later, and say something intelligible, was to make some sense of the wastefulness. Some of us did it better than others. Most of us, I imagine, gave it a try. Certainly every editorial page in every newspaper in the land gave voice to grief, sorrow, and national pain. I read it all as you did. I said something, and it helped for the preacher to gather it up in worship.

But I found the truest commentary on the topic of the death of those seven astronauts preparing for this day, thinking about value and giving and sacrifice and stewardship. I had chosen the text for a number of reasons: First, I love it and when you're asked to preach at an event like this you're allowed to pick a text and not feel like you've violated the congregation's need to hear the balance of the lectionary. And second - because I've come to think it's the best stewardship story in the Bible. And third, and not the least, because Johanine version is the lectionary text Sunday after next, a fact I assumed would not be lost on my hearers today.

In any event, I recalled a brief sermon of Paul Tillich's called Holy Waste - in The New Being and I got it out and in it I found a meaningful word about Christa McCauliff and Ann and the others. Tillich wrote:

> "The history of humankind is the history of men and women who wasted themselves and were not afraid to do so. They did not fear the waste of themselves, of other men and women, of things in the service of a new creation. They were justified, for they wasted all this out of the fullness of their hearts." [p. 47-48]

Professor Tillich went on to lament that Protestantism has lost a lot by neglecting the grace of wasteful self-surrender. He asked: "Are we not in danger of a religious and moral utilitarianism which always asks for the reasonable purpose - the same questions as the disciples in Bethany? There is no creativity, divine or human, without the holy waste which comes out of the creative abundance of the heart..."

Have you ever done it? Ever been wasteful out of the fullness of your heart - foolish, gloriously extravagant? If you have not, that's too bad, because there is a sense in which you haven't loved fully until you've been made to feel a little foolish. Which

means that surely all of us have, on some occasion, bought a dozen roses when one would have sufficed, or written a silly love note that still makes us blush to recall it - even if it was in fifth grade, or shouted "I love you, God" into a night sky or prayed it or wrote it into a diary, or even in a cocktail party conversation suddenly turned racist edged ourselves out across the line of socially accepted and expected behavior because of a buring love for God and all his multi-colored children which is planted deeply in our heart.

The text is about a foolishly extravagant woman who does a foolisly wasteful thing for Jesus. The scene for the incident is set by a high level conference in the palace of Caiphas, the priest, puppet ecclesiastic, Jerusalem, 33 A.D. "Jesus must go," they decided. Enough is enough. He has come to our city, insulted us, caused trouble in the temple, is daily making us look bad. He must go." With that terrible dye cast, ~~Matthew~~ Mark shifts scenes to Bethany, where ~~he was staying with his friends, Mary, Martha, Lazarus~~. On this evening he is in the home of Simon, who used to have leprosy. They're sitting on the dirt floor, the men are, cross-legged, eating out of a common bowl, probably dipping chunks of bread into oil. They're talking,

laughing some - about the look on the Pharisees' faces when Jesus turned over the tables and the pigeons got loose and the fat salesman tripped over the lambs and fell into the next booth where the calves were. Without a word she penetrated that clubroom and walked to where Jesus sat, and looked at him intensely, knowing that this festivity was prelude to disaster, and caught him extended, dipping his bread in the olive oil, poured out on him the expensive perfume in the precious alabaster jar she had treasured for years, given to her by her mother when she became a woman.

The moment, frozen in time, was powerful; at first awkward, embarrassing, shocking, and as he sat, paralyzed by this peculiar honor - rich, aromatic perfume running down his neck, soaking into his shirt, her vulnerability was punctuated by a gasp from the other side of the circle. "What a monstrous waste! Why, if she had just given that to us, we could have sold it and fed a lot of hungry people."

It is grossly inappropriate to use what he said next as a poverty policy. Jesus spent most of his time with poor people. He was one of them. He was their advocate. At least part of what is going on in the Gospel accounts is the eternal conflict between the haves and have nots, the privileged and under-privileged, the ins and outs. The common people heard him gladly. That means the poor people. He said what he said about

them here to protect this woman in her foolish extravagance. And then, he even tried black comedy. Like a critically ill person joking about the funeral, Jesus tries a joke about her annointing him for his burial, because the other event people got annointed for in Israel is coronation. (he's probably protecting her again.)

It's a vulnerable feeling to have acted foolishly for love, like a three year old bringing the prize begonia - plucked and clutched tightly in his hand - to his mother as a gift of love. It's ~~much~~ hard to be the recipient of grace sometimes. Jesus, the lover, loves this woman, honors this woman, by ignoring all that is prudent and sensible and economically viable. ("What she has done is beautiful,") he announces to her detractors. ("She will be remembered forever.")

He may have overstated that a bit. She is not, in point of fact, one of the personalities that we remember much at all. And I think the reason is that what she did is peculiar and unlikely and we don't do things like that and the pragmatist in each of us can hear our own voice expressing concern about this wastefulness.

We are, in fact, as Professor Tillich suggested, religious and moral utilitarians. We preachers even think we've made a point about stewardship when we remind our people that they are spending more on pet food than they're giving to their church. - which is true but neither relevant nor persuasive -

use [illegible] grace [illegible] to [illegible] the [illegible] example

We are inclined to divine value in terms of functionality. What is valuable is what functions efficiently, is productive, efficient. But, in fact, art is not productively functional. Money spent on form could be spent on efficient function. But there is human value to beauty which transcends even the immediacies of hunger and every artist knows that, thank God. In fact, money spent to keep the church beautiful in the city could be buying food. But there is a hunger assumed and addressed by beauty and our love for it that may ~~transcend~~ illuminate - not replace - but ~~transcend~~ illuminate and energize our commitment to deal with human need. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, of Newark, New Jersey, wrote an excellent article in the Christian Century on urban church which is very helpful. Bishop Spong observes:

> "Urban life is not beautiful. Garbage collection is generally poor. Trash litters the streets. Many homes are in poor repair, and some are abandoned bits of dilapidation. Many city people are so depressed that they deliberately fill their lives with ugliness, as an unconscious commentary on the way they feel valued by others. Consequently, it is espectially important that city churches be places of beauty...Money spent to beautify urban houses of worship is not wasted, for beauty is a gift. ~~Churches need to bear witness to the power of beauty, and to the sense of caring communicated~~ . . .

× If they didn't, there would be no art. If function defines value, Van Gogh would not have been so shamelessly extravagant.

by clean, sparkling sanctuaries, naves and exteriors...Great Churches of the past, with expensive maintenance needs, are the legacy we have bequeathed to urvan dwellers. When we fill these churches with poorly prepared liturgies and shallow, inane preaching, we add to the urvan poor's sense of being surrounded by a non-caring, non-valuing world. Urban church structures need to shine as centers of beauty, as symbols of hope, as signs of the Kingdom. They need to be living parables of God's caring."

What about the poor? What is our responsibility? What was the disciple's? History teaches a hard lesson here. Humanism without transcendence produces the worker's paradise, as in Ethiopia.

On the other hand, our God is a God of justice, a God who hears the cries of the poor, who favors the underdogs, and who clearly holds us responsible for one another. The theme of this conference is not economic justice, although it might be, for that is the issue which will command the future and with which those of us in the First World, the privileged world, the rich world, must come to terms. It is a misreading of the text and a terrible misreading of the entire Biblical witness to conclude that poverty is anything but the major item on the agenda.

is the issue of economic justice + how to stop the widening gap between rich + poor + begin to close it. there is the issue, also nuclear proliferation which is more fundamental to the future existence of our society, or even the world.

That having been said, may I submit that economic justice and extragant love are not mutually exclusive.? In fact, somewhere in the Good News there is an invitation to love and to be loved so much that we know what it means to be carried away, and to love so thoroughly we are willing to be foolishly extravagant.

So there is a tension - a dialectic - a conflict even, between a Lord who said so simply one time, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," and a culture which responds: "When E. F. Hutton speaks, everybody listens."

God's word comes in disguise sometimes. I find it with ~~some regularity~~ regularly in those delightful Wall Street Journal features which simply hold up for investigative inspection, a slice of contemporary American life. Some time ago an article appeared on "Yuppie Love - Detroit Auto Makers Try to Increase Sales To Young Professionals." Yuppies, "young, urban professionals," are having an enormous impact on politics and commerce and are already acknowledged as our culture's next "taste makers." Yuppies are defined variously as "people who listen to National Public Radio while jogging," or typically, "a childless couple, mid-30's, who live in a condo, work hard, do aerobic exercises, canoe in the wilderness and drive a $25,000 Saab." "We are," one of them told the reporter, "very into value."

Market researchers in the steel and glass towers of Detroit now know that Yuppies and all of us influenced by that image ("prefer cars that befit their new affluence, reflect their desire to be socially responsible and don't remind them of their parents.") ~~Chrysler and GM~~ Automakers have invested more than one billion dollars in the Yuppie cars. The Journal's moral and subtly sermonic conclusion was in this observation:

> "Yuppies' fondness for gadgets has revived the turbo charger industry and given rise to the $3,000 car radio. Affixed to a turbo-charged Saab seen recently in Detroit was a bumper sticker that read, 'He Who Dies With The Most Toys Wins.'"

Well if we ever got around to understanding and remembering what this extravagent woman did for Jesus one time, we might be saved by a truth deeper than that bumper sticker. ~~And if we don't hear that Gospel, it appears that we can be described, defined and celebrated by that blunt epitapth "the most toys wins."~~ Jesus tuaght that the most love wins; that is, the most grace, and giving, and extravagance, and occasional foolishness.

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Of course we must calculate. Someone said the utility company will not consider the lilies of the field as monthly payment - regardless of how splendidly they are arrayed. Of course, we have to heat our churches and light them and balance the budget and pay the janitors and feed the hungry and clothe the naked and pay the secretaries and shelter the homeless and buy Bibles for the children and announce Good News to the oppressed and fix the organ.

Douglas John Hall argues eloquently that stewardship's imperative is to love this world deeply and profoundly and I would add foolishly, extravagantly. Hall suggests that this is the key, not better techniques. Hall wrote: "This world is the world for which God offered up the 'only begotten Son.' This I believe is where the theology of stewardship must seek its real foundation, and if this foundation is missing then no amount of beating the drum for God and money will make the least difference." [The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age, p. 68]

Of course we must calculate. Of course we must learn about how to use the best materials, organizational plans and campaign strategies available to us. The battle for the tax deductible dollar in our nation is on and we're not even on the field yet. Our people are asked to give money to a dozen causes a day,

all of whom are doing a better job of the asking and explaining than we are. Of course we must calculate and of course we must do a better job. But the danger to the church is not from irresponsible extravagance so much as the dullness and dryness that prudence often becomes.

Frederick Buechner suggests that "the church is destroyed by people who are afraid to be human, brave, and loving, and to take chances," and that the church lives where "for Christ's sake we are willing to look like fools: where we understand that without simplicity and passion and outlandishness no church is worth two cents." [A Room Called Remember, p. 125]

That's true about our churches. And I know out of my own experience, that it is true about us as individuals. We must be responsible. The burden to do our ministry successfully - which feels like prudently - is a heavy and relentless one.

Paul Tillich wrote: "People are sick, not only because they have not received love, but also because they are not allowed to give love, to waste themselves. Do not suppress in yourselves or others the abundant heart, the waste of self-surrender, the Spirit who trespasses all reason. Do not greedily pressure your time and your strength for what is useful and reasonable." [op. cit., p. 48]

The cross of Jesus Christ is God's extravagant love. The death of Jesus Christ is, at least, foolish extravagance. It is also invitation to a fullness of life which is free to allow love and passion to be expressed. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an invitation to tears of joy at God's love for us, and a passion for the life of the world in God's love. It is an invitation to music and laughter and a freedon on occasion to be so overwhelmed by it all that we - even we - risk becoming foolish, foolishly extravagant - for the love of Christ. Amen.